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ABSTRACT

A statewide survey of over 1,100 voters in the state of Washington indicated that voters in the state have a positive perception of the performance of superintendents and principals in the majority of management areas evaluated. The survey gathered voter opinions from different sizes of school districts concerning educational management at the district and school levels, the amount and quality of information used by the public in developing perceptions of school management, and the quality of instruction and programs in schools. Major findings include indications that there is high voter interest in issues of school management: that district size significantly affects respondents' views of the schools: that voters are concerned about student discipline, student counseling, collective bargaining, and personnel management: and that involved and knowledgeable citizens have more positive attitudes toward schools. In addition, results of the survey suggest that, after basic skills, voters are most supportive of vocational, science, and career education and that administrators should enlarge their audiences to include those who do not yet know much about schools. Those who are highly involved in schools tend to use personal sources of information more than those less involved, who rely heavily on the media. (Author/WD)

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PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

Paper Presented at the 1981 Annual Meeting of

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by

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PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT
IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Voters in Washington give higher grades to their schools than did respondents to the nation-wide Gallup Poll. The results of a state-wide survey of over 1100 voters indicate they have a positive perception of the performance of superintendents and principals in the majority of management areas evaluated.

By focusing on school management, this survey is the first of its kind to be completed in Washington state. It gathered opinions of voters from different sizes of school districts in a sample that was proportionate to the number of voters in each size category in the state. The survey was conducted by the Bureau of School Service and Research at the University of Washington for the School Information and Research Service and co-sponsored by Washington Association of School Administrators, Washington State School Directors Association, Association of Washington School Principals, and the Association of Educational Service Districts. The major results of the survey are summarized as follows:

1. A strong response rate (57%) for the survey indicates that voters have a high interest in the issues in the survey. This interest was futher demonstrated as over one-half of the respondents added personal comments to their surveys before returning them.

2. It is not sufficient to simply examine the total state-wide responses because specific differences emerge when the respondents are separated into subgroups. Although parental status did not affect responses as much as would be expected, the size of the district has a substantial effect on how respondents view the schools. The highest ratings occur in the 2001-5000 student districts and those districts with less than 500 students.

3. Although most management performance received positive ratings, respondents expressed concern about four important areas: student discipline, student counseling, collective bargaining, and personnel management (hiring, firing, promotion, and evaluation).

4. Citizens who are more involved in the schools and who have higher levels of knowledge about them consistently give them support, have a higher regard for management, think the schools are more concerned about their welfare, and desire

increased two-way communication. Although those who were less involved and less knowledgeable about schools thought favorably about many management areas, they were more likely to say they didn't have enough information to respond to many items.

5. In education issues currently of interest throughout the state, the survey found the following: better than two-thirds of the respondents believe teachers should be able to suspend students from school, that students with unexcused absences should make-up missed time after school or on Saturdays, and that unused school buildings should be used for other community services and not sold; nearly 60 percent favored punishing students by isolating them from other students for an entire school day; and respondents were split over the issue of whether many school districts are too small and should be consolidated.

6. In order to develop a picture of the relative support of educational program areas, respondents were asked to allocate additional money to programs after basic skills were completely funded. Vocational Education clearly garnered the most support, followed by Science and Career Education.

7. Newspapers were the most often cited source of information for learning about school matters among all the respondents. However, the other key sources varied greatly depending on parental status and level of involvement with schools. Non-parents and those less involved looked to television and radio news for their information. Parents and more highly involved respondents cited more personal sources: school bulletins, teachers, and their children. Administrators are doing a good job of reaching their "natural" audience of involved parents, but they should enlarge that audience and contact others who do not yet know much about schools. These people will also be electing legislators and voting on issues related to state education.

8. Before attempting to incorporate the results of this survey into planning future strategies, each district should pay careful attention to its own specific composition: size, level of parental and non-parental school involvement, and evidence of what and how much information citizens have about the schools. This could be done either through formal polling techniques like this survey or by more informal means such as community meetings. The end result should, in either case, be an increase in two-way communication between the schools and the community. The findings of this survey indicate this increased communication should also result in an increase in positive and active support for education.

BACKGROUND

The success of public education in the State of Washington is to a large degree contingent upon the backing of its citizens. This is expressed by their support of levies, bond issues, legislation enhancing education, and by their interest and involvement in educational activities. Often the feelings and perceptions of the public do not become evident until it is too late; the levy fails, unfavorable articles and editorials are published in local newspapers, and citizens protest unpopular school board or administrative decisions. At that point, all the school officials can effectively do is to react to the prevailing pressures.

There is, however, a more pro-active situation which can occur. This involves identifying potential problems before they arise and developing mutually satisfying and effective solutions to them. Identifying problems before they occur is not an easy task. Accurate and comprehensive information must be available and this needed information is often missing. As a result, decisions are made and plans are implemented based on incomplete data or an erroneous picture of the situation.

There has been a lack of current information about the public's perception of education in Washington state, particularly in the area of school management. Surveys which encompass the entire nation, such as the annual Gallup Poll, have been conducted. These surveys, however, deal with concerns of general educational issues rather than focusing on administrative and management issues.

In an effort to gather information on the public's perception of school management in the State of Washington, the School Information and Research

Service (SIRS) decided to conduct a survey in this area. Because the scope of the survey would include subjects of interest and areas of responsibility shared by other groups of professional educators, SIRS joined with other school management organizations as co-sponsors. In addition to SIRS, this group includes the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), the Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA), the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), and the Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD).

As a result of discussions between representatives from these five organizations and staff from the Bureau of School Service and Research of the University of Washington, a two-phased program was developed. Phase I of this program was designed to collect information on the public perception of school management using a state-wide survey as the method to attain this data. Phase II of the program will use information collected by Phase I to develop an action program. The survey focused on four central concerns:

(1) the public perception of overall school management at the district level;

(2) the public perception of individual building management at the local level;

(3) the amount and quality of information used by the public in developing their perceptions of school management; and

(4) the public perception of the instructional aspect of schools, including the overall quality of educational programs.

SURVEY SAMPLE SELECTION AND RESPONSE RATE

The sample population consisted of registered voters in Washington state who have voted at least once in the last three years. Prior to selecting the random survey sample the 300 school districts in the state were classified according to size categories. As indicated in Table 1, although more than 70 percent of the districts have less than 2,000 students, these districts only include 15.5 percent of the state's students. In order to obtain a sample that reflected the possibly different perceptions of voters in differently sized districts the selection process was stratified according to district size.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF DISTRICTS, STATE STUDENT POPULATION AND SURVEY SAMPLE BY SCHOOL DISTRICT SIZE

Size Category	School District Size	Number of Districts	Percent of all School Districts	Student Population	Percent of All Students	Percent of Survey Sample
I	1-500	113	37.7%	21,410	2.8%	4.7%
II	501-1000	57	19.0%	40,810	5.3%	7.8%
III	1001-2000	41	13.7%	56,217	7.3%	7.1%
IV	2001-5000	48	16.0%	150,178	19.7%	21.4%
V	5001-10,000	21	7.0%	144,882	19.0%	15.4%
VI	10,001 & above	20	6.7%	350,553	45.9%	43.6%
	TOTALS	300	100.0%	764,050	100.0%	100.0%

The final overall return rate was 57 percent of the 2,443 voters selected to participate. This included both surveys returned with responses, as well as

letters returned indicating the respondent did not have enough information to complete the survey. Generally, the return rate was progressively higher for the small districts except for the 2001-5000 group, which had the lowest return rate overall. A follow-up letter to those selected to answer the survey increased the return rate from 25 to 50 percent among the various counties sampled.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The brief summary that follows is part of a much larger, more-detailed analysis of the survey of over 1100 voters. Because each respondent was asked to answer 80 questions, this present report can only highlight some of those responses. A full analysis is contained in the final SIRS report.

Perception of Management Performance (Agree-Disagree Items)

The respondents were asked to react to 34 statements about the performance of principals and superintendents as well as to statements about current educational issues in the state. Overall, the respondents were more positive about management performance; yet, most of the areas they felt most positive or negative towards were those addressing issues rather than performance. The areas receiving the most positive responses were: 1) requiring more professional training for teachers, 2) favoring merit pay for teachers, 3) affirming the availability of the local principal to discuss concerns, 4) favoring increased voice for teachers in selecting curriculum, 5) desiring more parent-teacher conferences, 6) noting school cleanliness, and 7) wanting unused school buildings used for community purposes and not sold. The following areas

received the most critical responses: 1) failing to handle student discipline, 2) calling for better inservice training for teachers, 3) wanting more opportunity to talk to school officials, 4) rejecting technological teaching methods, 5) criticizing secondary school counselors, and 6) failing to adequately teach students about the hazards of alcohol and drugs. The remainder of the items, most of them tapping perception of management, were favorable rather than unfavorable.

There are a number of general trends appearing in this data, when the responses are separated into subgroups. First, parental status, surprisingly, makes little difference in how people respond except for a few areas. Two examples where there were differences are listed below in Table 2.

TABLE 2

"My local school keeps me regularly informed about what's happening in the schools."

	Agree	Disagree	Not Enough Information
Non-parents	44.8%	34.4%	20.8%
Parents	55.1%	28.2%	16.7%

"School buildings that are closed should be used for other community services and not sold."

	Agree	Disagree	Not Enough Information
Non-parents	72.6%	18.3%	9.1%
Parents	65.9%	23.9%	10.2%

District size greatly affects how respondents perceive school management performance. Those in smaller districts are less likely to approve of school closures and less likely to think districts are too small. They also were more likely to feel that there was more contact and responsiveness on the part of principal, superintendent and school board, and that they were being well informed. Respondents in larger districts were less likely to think schools were doing a good job raising money, or that the counselors were doing a good job, and more likely to think that discipline was worse now than it had been in the past. They were also more likely to want an opportunity for input to the schools.

Some of the most interesting patterns developed in middle-sized districts (2001-5000 students). In these districts respondents reflected feelings of either smaller or larger district respondents, depending upon the issue. For example (see Table 3), they were like larger districts when supporting the district's ability to keep good teachers, and schools' general regard for the community, but more like the smaller districts regarding school board responsiveness.

Level of school involvement and amount of knowledge about schools also affected responses. Those with high involvement and knowledge were more positive about management performance. Those who were less involved and less knowledgeable also thought favorably about many management areas, however, they were more likely to say that they simply did not have enough information to respond to these questions.

As a whole, the respondents had less information to assess existing conditions than to prescribe desired conditions in the schools. For those

TABLE 3

"My district is successful in keeping good teachers in schools."

District Size	Agree	Disagree	Not Enough Information
I (less than 500)	55.0%	40.0%	5.0%
II (501-1000)	48.6%	42.1%	9.3%
III (1001-2000)	48.7%	35.0%	16.2%
IV (2001-5000)	66.7%	13.4%	19.9%
V (5000-10,000)	65.6%	15.3%	19.1%
VI (more than 10,000)	57.4%	15.9%	26.7%

"Schools seem to be off in their own world and don't relate to everyday concerns."

District Size	Agree	Disagree	Not Enough Information
I (less than 500)	37.9%	53.4%	8.6%
II (501-1000)	35.5%	56.1%	8.4%
III (1001-2000)	49.4%	41.8%	8.9%
IV (2001-5000)	24.2%	65.6%	10.2%
V (5001-10,000)	31.3%	57.0%	11.7%
VI (more than 10,000)	32.0%	56.1%	11.8%

"The local school board is responsive to community needs."

District Size	Agree	Disagree	Not Enough Information
I (less than 500)	60.0%	31.7%	8.3%
II (501-1000)	57.4%	28.7%	13.9%
III (1001-2000)	53.8%	28.8%	17.9%
IV (2001-5000)	58.1%	21.9%	20.0%
V (5001-10,000)	48.1%	23.8%	28.2%
VI (more than 10,000)	44.4%	27.6%	28.0%

statements which talked about the existence of an active situation (e.g., "The principal meets regularly . . ."), there was an average 21.5 percent "not enough information" responses. For those statements which referred to conditions which were not actual but desired (e.g., "Teachers should be required . . .") there was an average of only 7.5 percent "not enough information" responses. Respondents seemed to be clearer about what they would like to see occur in the schools, but less certain about what is actually happening. Overall, respondents who to a greater degree felt they did not have enough information to answer the items tended to have one or more of the following characteristics: live in larger districts, have children out of school, be married non-parents, have either one or no children, or have lived in the district less than five years.

Rating of Management Performance

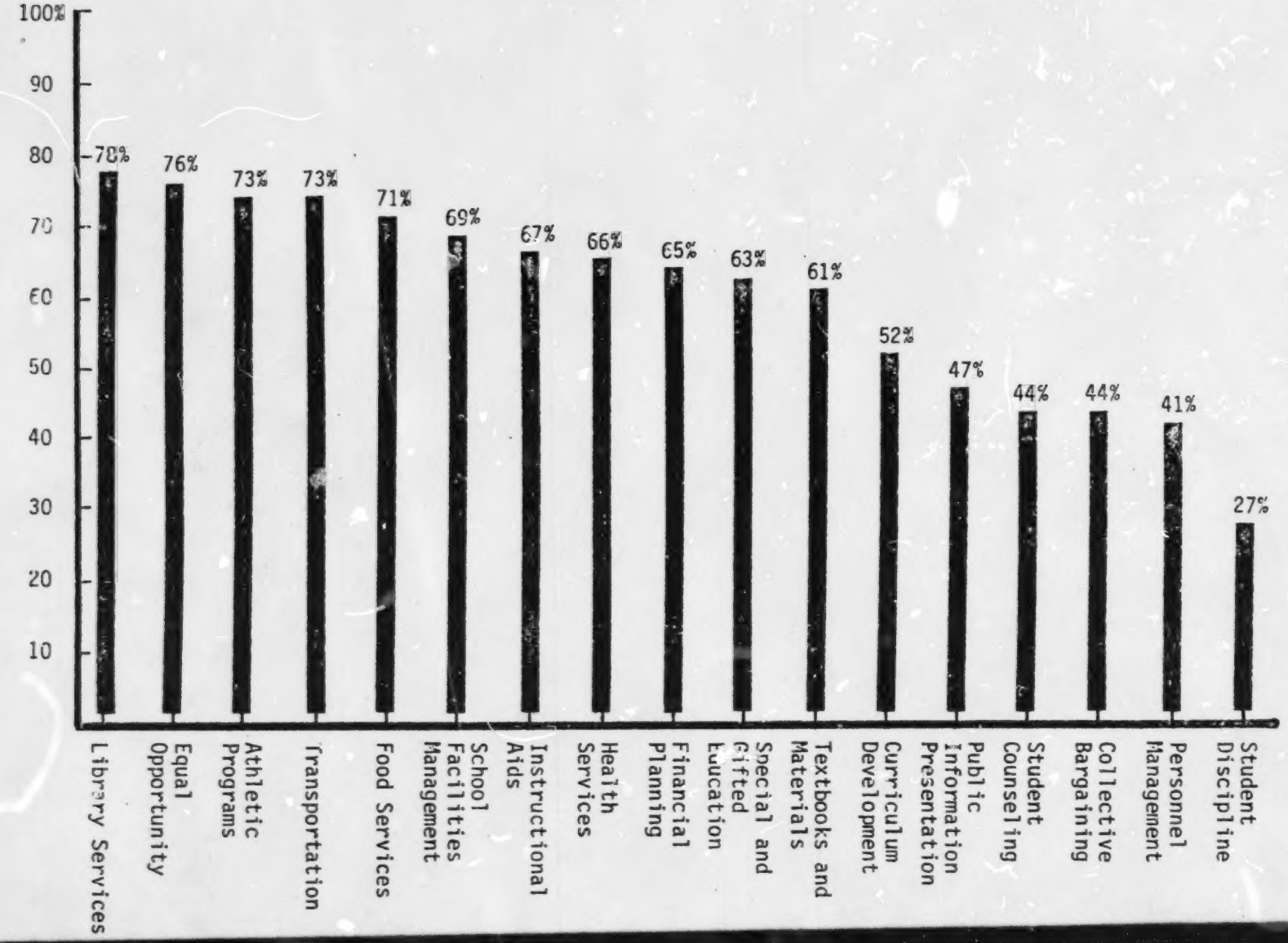
Several interesting patterns emerge in respondents' evaluations of the 17 primary areas of management responsibility. The majority of areas received more "excellent" and "good" ratings than "fair" and "poor" ratings (see Table 4). These areas rated higher also tended to be those for which respondents had sufficient information to answer compared to those areas rated more negatively. For example, 65 percent rated athletic programs "excellent" or "good" and only 12 percent indicated they did not have enough information, as opposed to curriculum development which received only a 31 percent favorable rating and more than 40 percent of the respondents did not have enough information to respond.

Again, as in the previous section on the agree-disagree statements, district size affected the respondents' ratings. Generally, the highest ratings

TABLE 4

RATING OF MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE BY AREA OF MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY

Percentage of "Excellent/Good" Ratings



appeared in the 2001-5000 student districts and those districts with less than 500 students. These districts had the highest ratings of performance in 14 of the 17 management areas.

Respondents with higher levels of school involvement and greater knowledge about schools generally rated management performance higher. However, the biggest difference among these groups was the increasing number of "not enough information" responses with lower levels of involvement and knowledge about schools. Parental status had no effect on the rating of performance areas.

Allocation of Educational Program Funding

In order to develop a picture of the relative support of educational areas, respondents were asked to allocate $100 among a number of programs after basic skills were completely funded (see Table 5).

TABLE 5

Program Area	Average Amount Allocated
1. Vocational Education	$13.72
2. Science	11.40
3. Career Education	11.21
4. Social Sciences	9.67
5. Special Education	9.53
6. Physical Education	9.[illegible]
7. Fine Arts	7.43
8. Gifted and Talented Programs	6.55
9. Foreign Language	5.95
10. Early Childhood Education	5.11
11. Bilingual Education	3.33

There were no differences in allocation by district size, and only slight differences by parental status: non-parents gave more money to early childhood

education and parents more to vocational education. This most likely reflects the concerns of younger non-parents about future situations and parents' concerns about the realities of the current job market. Involvement and knowledge levels had little effect on responses.

Grading of Schools

Respondents graded their schools more highly than did the nation-wide respondents to the 1980 Gallup survey. Although Gallup only asks about community schools, respondents in the present survey were asked to grade their child's school, community schools, and schools in the state as a whole. As seen in Table 6, respondents gave the highest grade point average (GPA out of a possible 4.0) to their child's school and lowest to state schools overall.

TABLE 6

Grade	Child's School	Schools in Community	Schools in State	Nation-wide Gallup Poll (1980)
A	19%	9%	4%	12%
B	41%	45%	39%	31%
C	29%	35%	46%	35%
D	8%	8%	8%	15%
Fail	3%	3%	3%	7%
GPA	2.65	2.41	2.33	2.26

Knowledge of Educational Issues and Personnel

Few of the respondents were aware of a number of areas concerning education. only 32 percent knew of the existence of Educational Service Districts, 35 percent knew that school districts are now required to make

descriptive guides available to the public, and less than half knew the number of classroom visits required of principals. Seventy percent of the respondents were aware of recent teacher contract disputes, with parents tending to side with the district and non-parents with the teachers, but with 59 percent of the overall sample siding with the district. More than two-thirds were aware of current transportation laws, and favored older children walking longer distances than younger children. Less than 12 percent even ventured an estimate as to what it costs to educate each student in the state per capita. Respondents, however, said they know the names of their superintendents (74%), some school board members (63%), principals (62%), and the State Superintendent (60%), with those in small or medium-sized districts more likely to have this information.

Sources of Information Useful in Learning About the Schools

Newspaper articles were the most frequently identified sources, followed by friends, special school bulletins, school-age children, and PTA meetings. Television programs, magazine articles, radio talk shows, and speeches by school representatives were the least identified sources.

There was not a large amount of variation by district size in the use of sources. Those in the smallest districts found friends and teachers most helpful, and all other districts named newspapers as the most-used source. In the smaller districts newspapers were second, and in the larger districts teachers were second. All of the districts named school bulletins as third choice, and either school-age children or friends as fourth and fifth choices. Only in the smallest districts were school board members named as fifth choice.

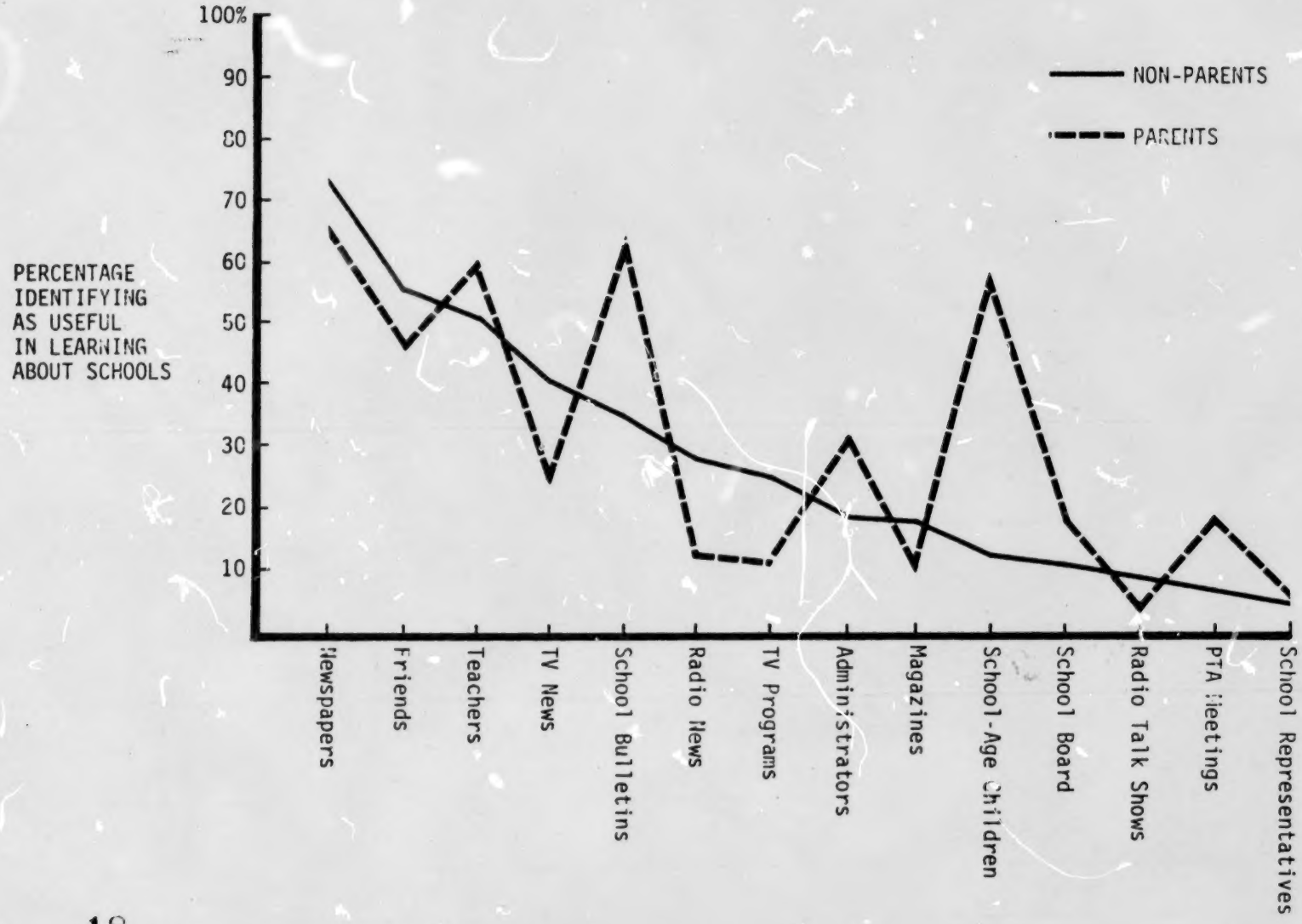
Parental status made a large difference in the type of information source used, as indicated in Figure 1. Although both parents and non-parents found newspapers the most useful source, the parents relied on more personalized sources such as school bulletins, teachers, school age children, friends, and administrators. Non-parents used friends and teachers, but also relied on the media to a greater extent, identifying television news, school bulletins, and television programs. Thus, parents appear to have access to sources of information and news which non-parents do not have. They come in contact with school personnel and receive more direct information from the schools. Non-parents tend to rely on more impersonal resources.

A similar trend appears with regard to the level of school involvement. Results indicate those who are highly involved in the schools tend to use personal sources of information to a greater degree than do those less involved, who rely more on the media. For example, nearly 80 percent of the highly involved respondents identified friends as a useful source, compared to 65 percent of the medium involved, and only 29 percent of the low involved. There is a similar pattern with PTA meetings and school bulletins. There is a reversal, however, in media news use, where the low involved respondents used media to a much greater extent than those more highly involved. These results are also consistent with the source identification analyzed by level of knowledge about schools. Newspaper use, however, tends not to fit this particular pattern, and is used by all levels of both involvement and knowledge.

Although this summary describes many findings of the SIRS survey, it only represents the highlights of a much more detailed final report. The final

FIGURE 1

INFORMATION SOURCES BY PARENTAL STATUS



report also includes an analysis that examines data from the perspective of other demographic variables than those identified in this summary. At the same time it suggests the need for additional research. For example, on what sources of information do respondents base their judgments of student discipline and counseling? Why are voters critical of administrators' handling of collective bargaining, but are supportive of the district in contract disputes? How do the perceptions of the non-respondents compare to those who returned the survey? How do the demographic characteristics of voters compare to the total adult population? The complete statistical analysis and the possibilities for future research are detailed in the final report.